



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

MEXICAN SMUGGLER SENTENCED TO 12½ YEARS IN PRISON FOR DRAGGING A MAN TO DEATH

A \$300 smuggling fee dispute turned deadly as a relative argued over increased fee

HOUSTON – An aggravated felon and convicted alien smuggler was sentenced yesterday to 12½ years in prison for dragging a man to death over a smuggling fee dispute last summer, following his conviction and an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) special agents.

Rafael Garcia-Flores, 37, a Mexican national smuggled Jimmy Jose Lopez-Mejia and two other illegal aliens into the United States July 6. He was collecting smuggling fees inside his vehicle at the Fiesta Mart parking lot near Interstate Highway 45 when Lopez-Mejia's brother was told the fee had increased from \$1,500 to \$1,800.

The \$300 dispute turned deadly as Lopez-Mejia's brother, Jose Santos Lopez-Mejia, argued over the fee increase from outside Garcia-Flores' vehicle. As the two began fighting, Garcia-Flores brandished a pistol and then accelerated his vehicle. The moving vehicle caused Jose Santos Lopez-Mejia to be dragged across the parking lot and onto the freeway. When the vehicle crashed to a stop, Jose Santos Lopez-Mejia was thrown into a retention wall.

All three passengers in the vehicle claim that as Garcia-Flores drove away he had drawn a weapon. According to one of the men, Garcia-Flores struck Jose Santos Lopez-Mejia on the head with the weapon. Jimmy Jose Lopez-Mejia stated Garcia-Flores had held the gun on him as he sat in the back seat until he and the other two men struggled with Garcia-Flores to disarm him. According to the men, the weapon was fired once. After the vehicle crashed and Jose Santos Lopez-Mejia lay injured in the street, the Harris County Sheriff's deputy arrived on the scene.

Garcia-Flores fled the scene on foot when the Sheriff's deputy arrived to render aid to the injured man lying in the street. However, he was apprehended by a security guard at the nearby Fiesta Supermarket and delivered to the deputy. The deputy, who had remained at the scene with the injured man and the three passengers in the vehicle, recovered the weapon that Garcia-Flores had drawn while leaving the scene,

Jose Santos Lopez-Mejia was later transported to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead.

"This was a senseless death," said Joseph R. Webber, ICE Houston special agent-in-charge. "Garcia-Flores had several aliens inside his vehicle and placed all of them in danger by his irresponsible actions. The escalation of the violence involved with human smuggling is of great concern to us, we are seeing more violence and more weapons. We are using all the law enforcement tools at our disposal to combat this problem."

ICE special agents and Houston Police Department officers apprehended three illegal aliens at the scene. Jimmy Lopez-Mejia, Henry Reyes-Martinez and Leobel Benitez, all Honduran citizens admitted they illegally entered the U.S. near the Rio Grande Valley. They also admitted they had been smuggled and then placed in a stash-house until they could be transported to their final destination, Houston, Texas.

Garcia-Flores was convicted in January for aiding and abetting the transporting of undocumented aliens on July 6, 2004, and for being a felon and illegal alien in possession of a firearm.

The Houston Police Department and the Harris County Sheriff's Office assisted ICE with the investigation.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Doug Davis, Joe Magliolo and Richard Magness, Southern District of Texas U.S. Attorney's Office, prosecuted this case.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.